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SUBJECT: OMAN MOVES EARLY TO INCREASE VOTER REGISTRATION

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) The Omani government has started an early media campaign to increase voter registration. In addition to placing announcements on the radio and in newspapers, the Minister of Interior held an unprecedented question-and-answer session at a gathering of the Oman Journalists Association to discuss the 2007 elections to the Majlis al-Shura. End Summary.

HITTING THE AIRWAVES AND THE PRESS

¶2. (U) Beginning in early September, Omani radio stations began airing announcements - in both English and Arabic - urging Omani citizens to register to vote in their home district (wilayat) for the 2007 elections to the Majlis al-Shura, the lower house of Oman's bicameral consultative body. The radio spots, replayed several times a day before and after news bulletins, reminded Omanis that it is "their right" to take part in the Majlis elections. Print notices of the announcements concurrently appeared in local papers.

¶3. (U) One of the radio announcements specifically targeted Omani women. These broadcasts, and corresponding newspaper notice, stated: "Omani women have proved to be a real and effective partner in the development of the Omani (Majlis al-Shura). Omani sisters, please register your name in the elections register for the Shura elections in 2007."

A FIRST: MINISTER ADDRESSES JOURNALISTS' GROUP

¶4. (SBU) The seriousness of official outreach regarding the Majlis elections was demonstrated by the October 2 speech of Minister of the Interior Sayyid Saud bin Ibrahim al-Busaidi to the fledgling Oman Journalists Association (OJA). The event marked the first time that a ranking official spoke to this group, as well as the first time that any sitting minister engaged in a public dialogue with an Omani private association. As such, the evening was a rare opportunity for an audience to hear not only directly from a minister, but to question him. The resulting give-and-take was, by local standards, surprisingly lively.

¶5. (SBU) The special Ramadan program, organized by the OJA, was attended by a primarily young, mostly male audience of about 80 journalists, professionals, and members of the diplomatic corps. Al-Busaidi opened with prepared remarks in which he outlined his Ministry's accomplishments in the 2003 elections for the current session of the Majlis al-Shura: convening an election commission, setting up polling stations, providing a legal framework by issuing decree 620

(which enumerates voter rights and establishes the voting process), registering voters, and supervising the vote. Al-Busaidi explained that the Ministry of the Interior will continue these efforts for the 2007 elections, along with new initiatives including on-line voter information (part of wider Omani e-government efforts) and visits to Oman's embassies abroad that will host voting centers.

¶6. (SBU) By participating in the last Majlis elections, the Minister said, "citizens had shared in the decisions of their country, and in democracy." He continued that the government hoped to "spread the culture of elections" in Omani society. Al-Busaidi added that the Ministry of Interior valued the participation of non-governmental organizations and associations, such as the OJA, in raising awareness of the importance of elections.

¶7. (SBU) More interesting than the Minister's speech was the hour-long Q&A session that followed. Opportunities for public interaction at such a senior level are virtually unheard of in Oman, and questioners were relatively forthright, particularly on tribalism and its role in Omani elections. The Minister attempted to deflect these concerns, saying there is only "positive" tribalism in Oman, and that the only meaningful tribal divisions in Oman are on paper. Following up, one journalist - an Egyptian expatriate - disagreed and asserted that the issue was and would remain a factor in Omani politics (and that the Minister's predecessor had said so.) The Minister laughed, saying that tribalism "is only a problem in your mind." Frustrated, albeit good-naturedly, the questioner sat down, muttering that discussion on the subject was of no use. Despite the challenging questions, the mood of the session was not acrimonious, and the evening was punctuated with laughter.

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COMMENT

¶8. (SBU) The government's early efforts to increase voter registration and stir up interest in next year's elections likely reflects a firm desire to raise the relatively low number of participants in the 2003 Majlis contest. (Note: Only 262,000 of an estimated 821,000 eligible Omanis registered to vote for the 2003 elections. End Note.) That a cabinet minister would tackle unscripted questions on the subject of elections demonstrates the government's resolve to make the elections a focus of public interest. Given Oman's very reserved public discourse, reflected in the usual timidity of its press, the questions asked of the Interior Minister and the critical thinking they reflect are indicative that at least some Omanis are looking outside accepted comfort zones in examining their society and are increasingly willing to express their thoughts in a public forum.
FONTENEAU